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Conrad's Picture of Irony in "An Outpost of Progress"

M'hamed Bensemmane

1 The prose fiction of Joseph Conrad, including his shorter narratives, tends to privilege settings located out of Europe, in distant parts of the world. This is the case for 'An Outpost of Progress', one of his early short stories that appeared in the collection *Tales of Unrest* (1898). This tale relates to the European colonial experience in Africa, and dramatises the interaction of two worlds, one characterized by the brutal mercantilism of the conqueror and the other by a down-to-earth and unsophisticated African mode of life. The Congo basin, which is the locus of this short story, as well as of his novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902), which develops the same theme, is a region about which Conrad had first-hand experience in relation to the dubious trade of ivory conducted by white adventurers. A flurry of panoramic descriptions, contrasting with impressionistic snapshots, gives substance to this grim narrative. An Afro-centred approach to it would take account of a plot-line and tropes which crudely reveal an environment and people whose stability is interfered with, and which put in perspective the colonial notion of "the white man's burden". A mock-heroic treatment is selected for the diegesis, through the portrait and actions of two ineffectual representatives of European civilisation in the African colony.

2 But the moral implications that emerge here reflect a certain complexity of Conrad's discourse, for they contrast the basest instincts of humans, notably through the white people's ivory business, with the declared aim of Europe, endorsed by him, to conquer and enlighten the "dark continent". My interest here is to study Conrad's attitude towards the imperial project, in view of his iconoclastic discourse and the ironic treatment he applies to his tale, and to query critical postulates to an anti-imperialist discourse in this text.

I – Location and points of contact

3 Despite the disparaging comment about the so-called "un-evocative prose of 'An Outpost', which adumbrates *Heart of Darkness*" (Guerard, 1958: 64-65), laudatory assessments usually draw attention to Conrad's "fine artistry" (Hawthorn, 1990: 168) or even refer to the story as a "masterpiece" (Moura, 1994: 70).

4 If anything, the scenario of this short story is directed by an impressionistic imagery which frames efficiently the dramatic scenes leading to the moral and physical annihilation of the two Western visitors in charge of a trading station lost in central Africa. The description of locale and people reflects the visitors' perplexity from the first. The generic word employed to refer to this environment is "the wilderness", as a cliché recurrently used to signify a *terra incognita*, implying the newcomers' (and indeed the narrator's) obvious incomprehension of a different order of existence, and a lack of affective contact with it. Geographically speaking, if the story unmistakably refers to the Congo basin, no territorial landmarks are available and no names are given to the location ; likewise, we have no name for the river on which the trading post is situated. This is deemed unimportant by the narrator, who prefers to focus on the strangeness of the place, and seeks to achieve an effect of de-familiarisation, with intensifiers producing dazzling images of the luxuriance of the fauna and the flora, "the immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life" (89) and "hippos and alligators (which) sunned themselves side by side" (89). Such images reflect the impassive and somewhat indifferent universe progressing alongside the two Europeans, a space in which codes of existence cannot be deciphered by them, owing to a blatant ignorance of such codes. For them, it is "a wilderness more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained" (85). The natives who visit the station to trade their ivory for the Outpost's cheap European products are thus 'exoticised', to match their environment. Their physical aspects and behaviours are rendered in derogatory terms from the two men's viewpoint : "naked, glossy, black, ornamented with snowy shells [...] [t]hey made an uncouth babbling noise when they spoke." (88) This treatment, supplemented by Kayerts' and Carlier's racist comments on their physical features, brings out the contrast between two radically different worldviews and modes of existence. Significantly, Africans are degraded as inferior beings, as "fine animals" or "funny brutes" (89) who would only receive some of the "rubbish" stocked in the store in exchange for the ivory they bring.

5 The strangeness of Africa is also underscored by the sense of claustrophobia of the two men, as they cannot size up and apprehend the space around the immediate vicinity of the trading station. Yet, this space is reportedly brimming with life :

> They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly) but unable to see the general aspect of things. The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhither.(88)

6 But the whole attitude of colonials is revealed by Conrad's underscoring of the uneasy and somewhat unnatural meeting of two opposed worlds. The obvious symbol of the presence of Empire in Africa is this quaint-looking steamer "that resembled an enormous sardine box" (84) which brings the two men up-river to the station, and is metonymically called "civilisation" when it returns just after their death. Another

symbol is the trading station itself, which marks an intersection of two cultural norms. The metaphoric reference to it as an "outpost of progress" signals the seemingly heroic penetration of civilisation in this part of the world, though its store is dubbed "the fetish" by the white traders to accommodate the local people's worshipful attitude towards it. This patronising term is approvingly commented upon with a Euro-centric explanation, i.e., "because of the spirit of civilisation it contained" (89). At all events, this simplistic interpretation of the natives' psyche translates an ignorance which seems to interpolate Conrad's critical position towards it.

7 Ivory is another trope reflecting the writer's moral concern, probably the most important in view of the dramatic developments that occur around it. It is a potent sign of the presence of Empire, as it impinges upon the local cultural continuum, as does Kayerts' and Carlier's presence in Africa. When treated and manufactured into luxury objects for affluent European households, ivory is the utmost symbol of refinement and reflects Europe's higher order of technical and artistic achievements. But when still a "raw" material, it refers back to its country of origin and the devious means through which it is acquired, i.e. in exchange for rags or trinkets, or worse still, through poaching or slave dealing, as happens when Makola the black assistant decides to sell their African labourers to black ruffians. Still, Conrad does not seem to take sufficient notice of the ecological damage done to the "dark" continent, which is an "unsaid" in the narrative. Actually, as Jeffrey McCarthy remarks in his eco-critical appraisal of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad declares an absence. "The work obsessively repeats one element to foreground another" (Mc Carthy, 2009 : 621). This remark can be extended to this short story which precedes the novella on the same theme, for indeed Conrad uses the terms "ivory", "tusks" and "bones", but never mentions the elephants from which these organs are brutally extracted.

II-Representations and misrepresentations

8 From the outset, Conrad orientates our reading towards the issue of what should be a civilised and decent representation of Empire in Africa, precisely by sketching an unrepresentative pair of agents: clearly, Kayerts and Carlier do not embody the advertised imperial fortitude. They are mock-heroes who belie the qualities of efficiency and determination which reputedly characterise European commerce in Africa. Their physical portrait is anything but flattering, with Kayerts presented as "short and fat", and "Carlier the assistant [...] tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs" (83). They are written off by their director as mentally unfit for their mission, which is why they are appointed to a far-off and barely productive trading station.

9 As an aside meant for the reader, Conrad makes the director address his servant on board the departing steamer to refer to them as "two imbeciles" with no skills:

> I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new store houses and fences and construct a landing stage. I bet nothing will be done ! They won't know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river is useless, and they just fit the station. (85)

10 As Ted Boyle remarks, "Conrad surrounds Kayerts and Carlier with some powerfully conceived images of decay, resulting from the men's neglect and untidiness" (Boyle, 1965: 88). Indeed, their house is poorly kept, and for edibles the two men rely on the

dwindling Company supplies of pulse and rice since they have not planted a vegetable garden to support themselves as their director told them to do before his departure. They largely depend on the food lavished by Gobila, the chief of neighbouring villages, despite his being arrogantly described as "a grey- headed savage" (91). Deflation is very much the privileged medium for their moral portrait, and they are recurrently shown as poor examples of imperial authority and inventiveness. Thus the image of the resourceful West which they are supposed to represent is derided by those "savages" who, contrary to them, combine industry with generosity, and regularly offer them "fowls, and sweet potatoes and palm-wine and sometimes a goat" (92).

11 The reversal of hierarchical roles is further amplified by the presence of Makola, the black assistant in the station, whose portrait exudes cold determination, and who receives the new arrivals as "more white men to play with" (84). He is "taciturn, impenetrable [and he] despised the two white men." (83). His composure and steadfastness counterpoint the carelessness of his white superiors. He actually acts as surrogate agent of the Company's interests where Kayerts and Carlier prove unable to make business thrive. As Andrea White notes, not only does Makola "run the Company's business of ivory collecting," (White, 1996 : 190), but he behaves as if he were the actual manager of the trading station. His decision to do business with black slave dealers to increase the amount of ivory in the station indicates his compliance with the Company's mercantile objectives. The switching of roles is well rendered in this exchange, when Kayerts discovers that their native workers have been sold :

> 'I did the best for you and the company', said Makola imperturbably. 'Why you shout so much ? Look at this tusk'.
> 'I dismiss you ! I will report you- I won't look at the tusk. I forbid you to touch them. I order you to throw them into the river. You-you !'
> 'You very red, Mr Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, you will get fever and die- like the first chief!' pronounced Makola impressively (98).

12 The irony of the situation functions in the sense that the competence of action in the territory is handed over to the "subaltern", who is made to speak and re-order the course of action. Kayerts and Carlier's inadequacy comes as an impaired picture of imperial achievement, just like in this 'dark' place of the world, the usual objects of light and civilisation fail to perform their duty. Indeed, the ship due to return to the station and relieve the white tradesmen from hunger and disease comes dramatically late, the trading station's mercantile activities grind to a stop and in the end, the elephant tusks, to be refined and turned into precious objects, lose all meaning in this remote corner of the world.

III- Conrad's dimmed image of progress

13 Stephen Land remarks that "'An Outpost of Progress' is typical in exhibiting the ironic contrast between stated ideals and actual motives" (Land, 1984: 43). Jakob Lothe adds that the irony "is not only wide ranging but also sophisticated" (Lothe, 1989 : 56). The very title of this short story reads like an intended derision, a tone which is applied throughout the narrative. The term 'progress' is recurrent, and always to point to an illusion. At no point are we made to see here that Europe's self-appointed duty to enlighten the continent is being attended to, in view of the dramatic events that occur around the trading station. The European signs of knowledge and culture themselves become tenuous, inadequate in 'dark' Africa, as their derelict state suggests. The books

left over by the former chief are torn and decrepit, and inappropriately evoke "Richelieu, d'Artagnan, Hawk's Eye, Father Goriot and many other people" (90). Likewise, the copies of a home paper mentioning the merits of "our colonial expansion" in Africa seem out of place and ring false :

> It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilisation, of the sacredness of civilised work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the world (90).

14 The two men's poor performance at their tasks contradicts this official declaration and the falsely sententious adage pronounced ironically by the narrator that "civilisation follows trade" (109). They can still dream of progress in Africa, and imagine "quays, warehouses, and barracks and [...] billiard rooms" (90) installed in this remote corner of the world in the future, but certainly not through their own agency.

15 Against this utopian evocation, a number of facts point to the bankruptcy of a system, whether it reflects an authorial disapproval of it as a whole or not. First, the trading post is itself downgraded by its managers. Then Kayerts and Carlier are unable to deal with unforeseen events, particularly the shooting of one of Gobila's men by the armed slave dealers, a fact which puts a dramatic stop to relations with the village chief, and means no more fresh food supplies for them. Conrad adds gothic visual and sound effects to make the tale oscillate between drama and grotesque. Carlier's pursuit of Kayerts in their house during a bout of madness shows the two men acting like "two characters in a Mack Sennet silent film" (Dowden, 1970 : 34). Further, the cross pitched on the former manager's grave is the object on which Kayerts hangs himself after inadvertently shooting dead his colleague. And Conrad mixes horror with the morbid grotesque when he draws the image of the dead man "standing rigidly at attention" and "irreverently [...] putting out a swollen tongue at his managing director" (110). We have also the blurred picture of the steamer returning to the station enveloped in thick fog, and the "sound pictures" of the "shrieks" and "fog wreaths" and the bell rung by Makola to guide the boat to its landing. This accumulation of lugubrious details metaphorically enshrouds the colonial enterprise with a sense of gravity and ethical questioning.

16 At this juncture, we can turn to "the subliminal purposes of (the) imagery" disclosed by the story (Dowden, 1970: 7) to interpret Conrad's message through his degraded picture of the colonial world and his numerous addresses to the reader. Jeremy Hawthorn deduces from the text the writer's "uncompromising analysis of the mechanisms of imperialism" (Hawthorn, 1990 : 168), while Lawrence Graver mentions a denunciation of "greed masquerading as philanthropy" (Graver, 1969 : 11), and Jean-Marc Moura "les incuries belges au Congo" (Moura, 1998 :70).

17 All those comments refer more to the moral misconduct of agents of Empire than they signify a total condemnation of a system of which Conrad was part and parcel. Edward Said relates the writer's attitude to a feeling of shame :

> His personal history was a disgraceful paradigm of shameful things, from the desertion of the ideals of his Polish heritage to the seemingly capricious abandonment of his sea life. He had become, like Kayerts and Carlier, a creature of civilisation, living in reliance upon the safety of his surroundings (Said, 1986 :37).

18 Possibly, the ironic picture of imperial misrepresentation deployed here may imply an authorial self-examination relating to his taking part in the imperial project. Still, the adventures described here, like those featured in Heart of Darkness, can hardly be seen

as the embodiment of Conrad's self-blame and shame in that respect. Kayerts, Carlier and Kurtz are such over-determined and peculiar examples of Empire that they cannot convey whatever shame may have been felt by their author. They are in the first place overpowered by an environment which they thought they could control, a "wilderness" which simply has activated their basest instincts and has led to their moral and physical annihilation. The regret felt by Kayerts with the utterance "help !.. My God", like Kurtz's expression "the horror ! The horror", can only convey a realisation of having acted under a malevolent influence coming from the wilderness - therefore irresponsibly.

19 And in fact, despite the device of uncovering and of deflating human postures, Conrad does not cross the line of ideological condemnation, and does not make colonialism a catalyst for the two men's failure and madness. His imagery and his diction of "wilderness" and "niggers", as part of his narrator's parlance, never place Africans in this "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1994), as imagined by Homi Bhabha, to establish a genuine dialogue between Europe and Africa. As said, the ivory has the dual function of symbolising progress and signifying the loot and violence involved for its acquisition. This quite clearly indicates Conrad's ambivalent attitude regarding the colonial ethos in Africa.

20 That the old continent for Conrad should continue to rule the world is surreptitiously introduced by the collaborative role of Makola, the African assistant, in maintaining Europe's foothold in Africa, a role that has been perpetuated in many European works of fiction.

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ABSTRACTS

Les fictions de Joseph Conrad se déroulent généralement dans des lieux reculés du globe. L'une de ses premières nouvelles, 'Un Avant-poste du progrès', publié dans Inquiétudes (1898), se rapporte à l'expérience coloniale européenne en Afrique. L'histoire met en opposition le mercantilisme brutal du conquérant et un mode de vie africain sans complexité. Le lieu de cette nouvelle est le Bassin du Congo, région bien connue de Conrad, et où il a pu observer l'infâme commerce de l'ivoire. Dans le récit, les descriptions panoramiques du décor alternent avec des images saisissantes de dureté. Une approche afro-centriste et postcoloniale de l'œuvre y relèverait une diégèse et des tropes révélant un environnement et un peuple dont la stabilité est compromise. Le traitement par la satire des deux « héros » représentant l'Occident en Afrique semble soutenir ce point de vue. Mais le récit , malgré son apparence iconoclaste, n'en révèle pas moins l'ambivalence de Conrad vis-à-vis de l'Empire.

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